

Winston

By: Sam Wingard

One day in October of last year, my wife and granddaughter had taken my dog Brandi, a mixed terrier, for a walk around the neighborhood. When they returned, my granddaughter came in and told me about a big white dog that had followed them home, but would not let them get close to him.

I learned from my neighbors that he had been a stray around the marshal field subdivisions of Carol Villa, Watson Circle, Fox Hollow and County Downs for over a year and that Animal Control had been trying to catch him for about a year. He was well known by many people for coming into their back yards and eating their cat food, mainly at night. One neighbor who gets home from work around 2:00 am had seen him roaming the Carol Villa neighborhood numerous times.

I determined that I would rescue him and either find him a good home or give him a good home so that he would not end up in the humane shelter. Once I started trying to catch him myself, I went to the local humane shelter and told them that I had an “unusual request”. I wanted to adopt a dog, but the problem was they had not caught him yet. When I told them about who I was interested in, they immediately recognized him. I left my name and telephone number with instructions to call me immediately if they caught him.

My neighbor across the street had started to leave scrapes out for him when he came around to eat their cat food. They called him “Big White”. They called me the next time he showed up and I grabbed a package of hot dog wieners and began a 5 week attempt to catch this charming big white dog who apparently did not want to be caught.

When I first met this big white dog, I immediately picked a name I could call him while trying to earn his trust. The name “Winston” just seemed so appropriate for this majestic animal from the very beginning.

At first, Winston would not let me get within 40 feet of him, even with “Angus Beef” wieners. That was the only package I had on hand when I started trying to catch him, don’t tell my wife. I went to the store and bought 8 more packages, the cheap ones, he didn’t even know the difference. At first I had to throw the wieners close to him and wait for him to eat them from a distance. Slowly, over 4-5 weeks and many packages of wieners, I was able to get him to come closer and closer until he would cautiously take it from my hand. However, he still would not let me touch him. If he was taking food out of my left hand, he would not let my right hand get anywhere near him.

I was finally able to coax him into my backyard with food and close the gate behind him. He looked around and immediately climbed, not jumped, the fence and ran off. I coaxed him in again and again he climbed the fence.

I was getting discouraged when I looked out the window and saw Winston in the backyard playing with my female dog, Brandi. He had climbed back in on his own. While they were playing, I slipped out and watched them playing. Slowly, I reached down and took hold of his choke chain he was wearing, not knowing how he would react. He was just fine. However, when I let go, he climbed the fence again. I went back in the house and put a leash in my pocket and waited. Sure enough, in about 20 minutes he was back playing with Brandi. The same things that have gotten all men in trouble for years got him too, food and women.

This was Saturday, November 29th. Not willing to take a chance on losing him, I walked him all the way from my house to Goodwin Animal Clinic on the Atlanta Highway. He had no collar, no name tag nor did he have a microchip. He was only wearing a rusty chock chain.

I instructed the vet to give him a good bath, trim all the matted hair (there was a lot), a complete physical and all needed shots. His tail was so matted, they had to completely shave it, and it looked like a "rat" tail. He was hearth worm free.

When I returned to pick him up, he looked like a different dog, beautiful. While checking out, a lady asked about him and I told her Winston's story. She suggested I have him neutered to help keep him from wanting to run away and roam, a known Great Pyrenees trait. I told her I was not ready to invest that much money in him yet, just in case I could not keep him from running away. She was so touched by his story that she offered to pay for the procedure herself to give him a chance for a good home. I agreed to this and when the vet tech asked her if she wanted a full blood workup before the surgery, she said "Yes, let's do a complete blood workup". When asked where she wanted regular surgery or laser surgery, she said "Let's do laser surgery, he will heal better and quicker". When I picked Winston on the following Monday afternoon, I asked the vet tech how much I owed them, she said "Nothing, Leslie took care of everything". I got Leslie's cell phone number. I call her periodically and keep her up-to-date with Winston's adventures and text her pictures of Winston. She is a major part of his journey.

I took my truck when I went to the vet's to pick Winston up. When I opened the back door of my truck, he immediately jumped in and sat down on the back seat like he had done it for years.

Our first stop was the humane shelter, to show them the dog white dog that all of us had been trying to catch for so long. He was on his way to having a permanent home. Winston and I try to take a couple of bags of dog food to the shelter each month.

I put up an electrified fence to try to keep him from climbing the fence until I could teach him to stay at home. I kept him in the lower part of the house where my “man-cave” and the laundry area are. I kept him on a leash any time I took him outside, even when we went outside in the backyard to eat. I slowly starting him off the leash in the backyard, but I stayed with him at all times. This went on for the first 4 days until my wife told me he had to spend more time outside by himself. I knew it was too early to leave him alone, but I did for only about 5 minutes. When I went back outside, Winston was “GONE”. He had climbed the electrified fence. I later read in a book I bought about Great Pyrenees that they would take the shock from an electrified fence to get out, but not to get back. I also learned that it took 30 days or more for them to get use to a new environment. Lesson learned.

I searched for Winston for the next 4 days during the coldest part of the year to that point without any luck. My telephone rang one night at 11:30 pm. It was my neighbor across the street informing me that if I was still interested, Winston was in their backyard eating their cat food. I told them I was on my way, hot dog wieners and all. I jumped up and started getting dressed. My wife informed me that I was an “Idiot” for getting up in the middle of the night, in sub-freezing” weather, to catch a dog that did not want to be caught in the first place.

I lured Winston across the street, but he would not let me touch him. I thought “Here we go again”. I got down to the last wiener and could not get my hands on him. I thought “Okay, it’s time to use Brandi again”. I used the last wiener to get him into the backyard and sure enough, Winston and Brandi started playing again. I went inside, got the leash, hooked him up and I have kept him ever since. I kept him on a leash every time we went outside for the next 45 days. I can now leave him outside with Brandi for extended periods of time. When I go to the backdoor to let him in, he is usually standing at the back door waiting to be let back in. I think “Winston is now home”.

My son-in-law read on the internet that Great Pyrenees make good therapy dogs. I was visiting my elderly neighbor at a local nursing home where my mother had lived prior to her death. On the way out one day, I asked the administrator if they currently used or would be interested in a therapy dog. She said they would be interested, I introduced her to Winston, and that began our current journey together. I checked out how to get him certified, and learned that Alabama does not require a formal certification and that there was no formal training available at the local pet stores. The administrator said all they required was a vet’s records of his health and shot records. We are now on record at 2 nursing homes and 2 assisted living facilities which we visit once a week.

Winston and 2 of my grandchildren passed out over 80 Christmas cards signed by Winston and including his “paw print” to both patients and staff at our first nursing home in December. When we started to leave, I told the grandchildren to “watch this”. There were about 20

patients and staff standing around the front desk area. I asked them “Hi, what’s this dog’s name?” Everybody answered in unionison “WINSTON”! Then I asked “What’s my name?” Nobody knew, I was just the guy who brought Winston. I am still just the guy who brings Winston. At the nursing home, Winston has rock star status.

Everyone wanted a picture of Winston, so I had a 4x6 picture made up with his name and paw print, had 120 printed and passed out all but one in 2 days. In February, we passed out over 250 valentine cards “from Winston” at the 4 facilities. We had 120 new pictures printed and are in the process of passing them out.

Our visits with the residents and staff are all about Winston. I could go by myself and pass out cards and pictures, get a “Thank you” and a smile and if I was lucky, a short conversation. But when Winston walks into the building, almost everybody brightens up. The smiles are a mile wide and last a long time. The conversations with Winston are long and sincere. Everybody remembers his name.

My son’s mother-in-law is a member of a state education sorority. They are planning on making Easter cards for the elderly and want me and Winston to pass them out to the nursing and assisted living facilities we go to.

My son-in-law brought me a book one of the ladies he works with wanted me to read. It is A Dog Walks into a Nursing Home, by Sue Halpern. It was about a rescued dog that became a therapy dog. It was great. The main thing I got from reading this book is that dogs love you “unconditionally”. It does not matter if you are standing up, lying in bed, sitting in a chair or sitting in a wheelchair. It does not matter if you have 2 legs, 1 leg or no legs at all. It does not matter how old or how young you are. It does not matter if your hand is steady, if your hand shakes, or if it is partly or completely paralyzed. He still likes to see you and have you pet him.

Winston’s journey continues.